



"Thank you, everyone, for all you have done for me. I'm ready to go now."

Those were my mother's last words. At least, that was what an aide told me in the Manhattan nursing home where my silver-bobbed, tiny-framed mother spent her last hours. The aide held my mother in her arms as her heart failed, imploring her to "Hang on, Ruth. Hang on." I've no idea if this story is true.

By the time I rushed there, an hour later, it was too late.

My first-generation, Russian-Jewish mother had long been depressed. She'd attempted suicide when I was a teenager, swallowing 30 sleeping pills, washing them down with hard liquor despite being a teetotaler, and then tying a plastic bag over her head. She survived only because my brother came home to our Bronx apartment unexpectedly and found her unconscious in the bathtub. From the hospital bed where she was recovering, she'd shouted, "My punishment for trying to kill myself is that I'm still alive."

"Maybe next time," I shouted back, looking away to hide the tears brimming my eyes, "you'd like us to leave you there." I yearned for her to say, "I'm so very sorry. I would never leave you." I wanted back the mother who, when I was small, had stroked and kissed my forehead each night before bed.

Mom had good reasons for her rage. She'd grown up poor in Brooklyn, across the street from a glue factory whose stench she could never forget. Her mother, my Grandma Ada, had lost half of her fingers as a child due to a crippling autoimmune illness. Ada supported her family by piecing together hats at a factory. Mom's father, the grandfather I barely knew, frequently abandoned the family to go off with other women.

At 20, Mom married my charismatic, poetry-writing father. But when his business failed, he evolved into a bully who humiliated her and hit my brother, sister and me.

Mom and I fought often. I was furious with her (and guilty over my fury) for her suicide attempt and chronic depression. I was terrified she would try again, and this time, succeed. I fantasized about having a mother who greeted each new day with joy.

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In his 60s, my father finally mellowed and became a much gentler man. He died at 76 of kidney failure. Despite my tumultuous relationship with my mother—now we argued because my husband and I didn't want children (could you blame me?)—I worried about her, in her gloomy, ground-floor apartment in the Bronx, alone for the first time since her young marriage.

"I will never need your help with anything," she yelled when I offered to help her move to a senior living facility.

"Then don't ever ask for it," I said, turning away, once again to hide tears.

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Three years later, a urinary tract infection landed her in the hospital with sepsis. Her organs shut down.

"She has less than 48 hours," the doctors said. But she held on.

Attempting to save her life, they gave her Livafed, a drug that drove blood toward her heart and brain. She lived, but lost six of her fingertips from the knuckle up, almost surreally, as if her own mother's illness had come back to haunt her hands.

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A foolish doctor said to her in a booming voice, "You should be very grateful that you're not losing your entire hands." Peering up at him through her bifocals, she spat out, "How grateful do you expect me to be?" For once, I applauded her sarcasm.

Months later, released from rehab, she moved into a dark, tiny room in an assisted living facility on the Upper West Side. Finding her that room had been a Herculean task. She didn't thank me for it, or for my non-stop caretaking of her. I told myself I wasn't in it for gratitude. Yet I couldn't deny that I wanted to hear, "I appreciate you."

On the first day in her new home, she fiercely whispered to me, "You're wasting your life by not having children ."

"You're one to talk," I said.

After a year, she moved to an independent living facility. She still resented my not wanting children, and our arguments continued. Since she could no longer manipulate buttons or zippers, I had her clothes custom-made with Velcro. At meals, she was clumsy and needed help. The workers at the facility marveled at what a good daughter I was.

She was overjoyed when my husband and I adopted a baby girl from Guatemala . I'd finally acknowledged to myself how deeply I yearned to raise a child, and how much I had feared doing so. At last, I felt ready to become a mother in my own way, not hers. My husband and I were determined to show our daughter gratitude and joy as she grew up.

In her new home, Mom had friends and played bingo. She and I ate out at Chinese restaurants. Things were better for five years. She was kind and loving towards my small daughter, who loved "Little Grandma," as we now affectionately called her because of her ever-shrinking body. Mom was playful, laughing and dancing with my daughter, and I remembered how she sang "Old MacDonald" and "My Grandfather's Clock" to me when I was little, in her surprisingly pretty, lilting voice.

Then a gust of wind threw her down in the street. She broke her hip and never fully recovered. She'd had some signs of dementia before the fall, but the accident seemed to speed it up. Slipping in and out of dementia, she was asked to leave the facility , and this time, she landed in a nursing home.

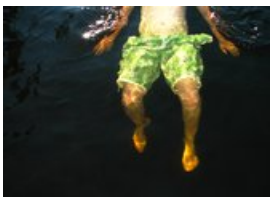
Throughout the nine years of her illness, I sat at her side with doctors, handled her rocky finances, bathed and diapered her when necessary. I spent many full days each week with her, giving up time with my husband and daughter.

Ultimately, I did it for love. Towards the end, a flurry of memories came back to me. How, a true Mama Bear, she rushed to my school whenever I felt wronged by teachers. How she sat for hours by my bedside when my fever spiked, laying cool compresses on my forehead and spooning soothing chocolate ice cream into my mouth. How she patiently sailed toy boats with me in our bathtub. And how she sang my daughter to sleep, softly crooning the same lullabies she'd once sung to me.

No, there hadn't been many thank-yous, but when the chips were down, we were by each other's side. Her actions, I saw, had always spoken louder than her words. As I stood over her lifeless body, I whispered, "Thank you ." And I chose to believe that in her final moments, she had spoken those same words.

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Helene Cohen Bludman · Writer/Blogger at Self-Employed

That is lovely, Janice. It seems that at the end you both got closure, which is a blessing. Hugs to you.

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Janice Eidus · Writer at Writer

Thank you, [Helene](#). I believe that is true, and I am grateful for it.

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Joan Bickley Stommen · Works at Gramcracker Crumbs

This made me tear up, remembering my mom's last words to "let me go be with your father." I love deep, honest, raw writing and you've done it so beautifully! Remember to share again come May!

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Janice Eidus · Writer at Writer

Joan, thanks so much. And what a good idea about May. Your mother's last words were beautiful.

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Susan Greenfield · Works at Fordham University

Sad and beautiful.

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Janice Eidus · Writer at Writer

Thank you so much, Susan.

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B Lynn Goodwin · Managing Editor/Freelance Writer at Writer Advice, www.writeradvice.com

Thanks for sharing this story. You come from a determined family. This is lovely.

Thanks for sharing this story. You come from a determined family. This is lovely because it is honest and unsentimental.

I remember the last years of my mother's life when I tried to remake the world so it would be more to her liking. Ridiculous, of course, but I believe you know exactly what I mean. Sometimes memories are more powerful than tangible mementos.

BTW, if you have any short pieces about your life, you might want to submit to Writer Advice's Flash Memoir Contest. Deadline is March 1 and details and Submittable link are at www.writeradvice.com.

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Janice Eidus · Writer at Writer

Thank you so much. I really appreciate your insight. I will look at WriterAdvice.

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Shannon Raus · Rockport, Texas

My Mother was not kind to me but her Mother had not been the best to her apparently although she was my beloved Grandmama. Not an excuse - just a story I was always told. We were never close and at 90 she had to come to Texas for me to help with her care. She hated it here and never missed a chance to tell me. She was first at my house but I finally moved her to an assisted living facility because she was so hard to deal with and I fell into horrid depression. She became reclusive and dementia came on suddenly and after going to the hospital for a week, she went into pulmonary failure and was ... [See More](#)

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Judith Henry

Such a beautiful, honest piece, Janice, that I so identified with. Wrapped in ambivalence, complicated, confusing, raw, it's still love.

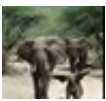
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Marlene Simmons Skulnik · CW Post

Oye....what a story. I am spent from reading it. Congratulations for getting it out of you...and thanks....because I feel like you partially wrote my own locked up tale.

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Terrieann Thompson

I'm sobbing over this as I am to going through a very similar situation. At times I want to scream after visiting my elderly, tiny, sarcastic Mother. She to had it very hard & did the best she could. Thank you x

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Kay Mausbach Daubendiek

As did I ~ taking all the experience and trying to keep the good and learn from the bad as I raise my 3 daughters. Thoughts and prayers for you..as when our Mothers are gone, it is final..and that is the hardest of all

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Barbara Laurin · University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Most touching and beautiful recounting of You and Your Mother's grateful relationship with each other!!

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Steve Bishop

Thanks! My grandma told us mom's last words were, "I'm no longer afraid." She laid back down and died. I don't know if it's true. My last words with her was when I was leaving for school, she said,"If I'm not home when you get here I'll still be at the doctor. Watch over your brother." Weeks passed. The next time I saw her was on my birthday. She didn't know who my brother and I were. Years have passed. I've always wanted to have said other things but in reality I was a teenage boy. I wasn't any good at words of love or other feeling words. Eventually I had to accept things as they were and be grateful for the time I did get to spend with her.

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